

## **Chapter Fourteen: Governance and Politics**

*By Thabo Makgoba, Archbishop of Cape Town*

*'No one is born a good citizen; no nation is born a democracy. Rather, both are processes that continue to evolve over a lifetime.'* –

Former UN Secretary-General, Kofi Annan<sup>1</sup>

It is a privilege to contribute to critical debate around compassion and governance, more specifically the theme of governance and politics within contemporary South Africa. Governance and politics go together and, coupled with values-based systems, they can be instrumental to serving society in a caring and compassionate manner. Essentially, governance is about relationships. As the saying in my mother tongue, Sepedi, goes: *kgoši ke kgoši ka batho* (A king is a king because of his people). Most importantly, governance is how we assume and carry out the responsibility of providing leadership, while politics is defined as activities associated with the governance of a country or an area, and especially the debate between parties that have power, Latour and Weibel (2005). These writers add that politics is not just an arena, a profession, or a system, but a concern for that which is brought to the attention of the fluid and expansive constituency of the public. The Greek root of the

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<sup>1</sup> Annan, 1998.

word further implies that politics is about the affairs of the citizens – their care and welfare and the sense of their own agency.

The way that leaders negotiate and exercise political power matters. The DNA of governance should be around how leaders make decisions. Drawing on this brief conceptualisation of governance and politics, one can conclude therefore that values are critical in guiding decisions taken by leaders. Public leaders are to be servant leaders or, in theological terms, God’s servants for the good of all. In this chapter I will draw on my biblical and theological background as well as South Africa’s constitutional values to critique the state of democratic South Africa, mainly relying on my public speeches, sermons, previous articles and the oral tradition which is a significant identity of our community.

Nelson Mandela said in 2000 that ‘The single most demeaning feature of our modern world is the persistence of massive poverty’<sup>2</sup>. In similar vein, U.S. President Franklin D. Roosevelt, in his second inaugural address, said, ‘The test of our progress is not whether we add more to the abundance of those who have much; it is whether we provide enough for those who have too little.’<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Mandela, 2000.

<sup>3</sup> Roosevelt, 1937.

Locally, as a faith leader, in the present day South Africa, I am drawn to Roosevelt's observation. I also firmly believe it when God says that people matter. 'God cares that his beloved children should all have adequate food, shelter, clothing and so forth. God cares that everyone should be treated with complete respect by everyone else, with no one marginalised, excluded or voiceless in the ordering of our common lives. This is what democracy is all about.'<sup>4</sup> The Anglican Church has aspired since the 17th century to be in the forefront globally in speaking for the voiceless. As Anglicans today we have kept that tradition: we try to act in solidarity with the needs of the poorest, the most vulnerable, and the most marginalised; including the strangers, the foreigners, in our midst. 'We are in solidarity with available, affordable health-care for all. We are in solidarity with effective rural development. We are in solidarity with education for all that truly equips our young people to be responsible citizens, able to face the challenges of adulthood..<sup>5</sup> In South Africa we support the country's National Development Plan, as conceived by the government, as consonant with what we advocate. We are concerned with honour and respect, with freedom, with unity and diversity, with healing, with democratic values and social justice; with human rights, with quality of life and liberating potential, for every single one of us.

I have argued elsewhere that in South Africa we need to breathe life into these commitments to one another, arguing that 'all those, in all sectors of society, who

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4 Thabo Makgoba, 2011.

5 Ibid.

have influence and power, [should] return to Nelson Mandela's way of governance and leadership: governance that was not threatened by healthy social discourse; governance that was always mindful of the plight of the poor and the marginalised; governance that took seriously its responsibility to all people who have given leaders their trust.'<sup>6</sup>

People of faith and of no faith subscribe to the prescription: 'In everything do to others as you would have them do to you.'<sup>7</sup> The Golden Rule, as we describe it, calls us all to care for others as we would like to be cared for ourselves. It seems so simple and yet we find it difficult to practise. Indeed, the history of South Africa would have been quite different had we begun long ago to live by this rule, especially during the eras of colonialism and apartheid, and our current condition would be different if democratic South Africa observed it now. Yet there is nothing to stop us from making the 'golden rule' our baseline in addressing our governance and political issues.

When I raise these issues in South Africa, the question always arises, why is an Anglican archbishop 'meddling' in issues of governance and politics? Anyone who thinks that Christians and churches ought to 'stick to religion' and not involve themselves in the public sphere, let alone become involved in questions of governance and accountability (politics), has clearly never read the Bible with their

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<sup>6</sup> Makgoba, 2014.

<sup>7</sup> Matthew 7:12, The Bible NSRV.

eyes open to what it really says! From one end to the other, it carries the clear message that we are called to be involved in and make a positive difference at every level of society, acting as the 'salt of the earth' of which Jesus spoke<sup>8</sup>. Our task is 'to attempt to hold the centre for an open society intact'<sup>9</sup> by calling upon all people of good will to become active citizens within South Africa – to put away the false dichotomy of politics and religion which feeds complacency.

When I address South Africans, I urge them to see that governance is another application, perhaps one of our most critical applications, of value-based decision-making. Governance is as much about human guidance as it is about institutional guidance. We exercise our responsibility for our future through the kind of leaders we put in charge. It is not about lording it over others, it is an expression of our care for others. This goes back to what I intimated earlier, that governance and politics seen together are really about servant leadership, value-based leadership and agency.

Before addressing the current situation in South Africa, let me locate my reflections on politics and governance within the context of the sacred texts which guide Christians. I have already referred to the exhortation in the Gospel of Matthew that we should do to others as we would have them do to us. Other biblical injunctions tell us to love our neighbours as ourselves, and require those elected to political

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<sup>8</sup> Matthew 5:13.

<sup>9</sup> Makgoba, 2011.

office to be good stewards, to show mercy and yearn for justice. The ninth of the Ten Commandments, in its instruction that 'you shall not bear false witness against your neighbour', calls for honesty and truthfulness, not only in personal or religious matters but, as is clear from elsewhere in the Law of Moses, in everything – including issues of business. Every aspect of trade and employment must be conducted honestly, and with compassion extended particularly to workers and those in positions of weakness. This includes injunctions that proper rest must be granted, the cloak of a poor person (which doubles as a blanket) cannot be kept overnight as surety, and special provision must be made for widows, orphans and other vulnerable or needy individuals. The values-based framework which these guidelines provide requires from those in political leadership that they see citizens not as pawns to be manipulated, but as people with and for whom they are obliged to build relationships of trust and sharing as they work out and live their own destinies.

South Africans regard theirs as a religious country, in which even many members of the Communist Party see no contradiction between their political allegiance and going to church, reading the Bible and reciting the Lord's Prayer. It is particularly appropriate, therefore, for me to critique South Africa through a religious lens. The Christian Old Testament tells us how it did not take long after the establishment of the monarchy for a succession of prophets to arise who felt obliged to condemn the ruling elites for extensive corrupt practices across economic, legal and political sectors, through which the poor and honest suffered. Prophets such as Amos were

moved to exhort: 'Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream'.<sup>10</sup>

In the South Africa of today, there are times during which I feel like the prophet Amos. Twenty years after liberation and the inauguration of Nelson Mandela as the founding president of our democracy, we are experiencing an alarming decay in public morality. I wrote recently:

*'Corruption is ruining our South Africa. Crooked leaders are betraying every South African. Valueless leaders are pocketing unearned monies, diverting resources from our communities and treating South Africans like a herd of sheep.*

*'And everywhere I travel, more and more South Africans are saying: "We are tired of hearing the promises that are never kept. When will our leaders wake up?"'<sup>11</sup>*

This article, and a speech I made at the end of a protest march to the South African Parliament last Easter – protesting against the treatment of our Public Protector, or ombudsman, for her handling of corruption issues surrounding our president – were

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<sup>10</sup> Amos, Chapter 5:24.

<sup>11</sup> Makgoba, 2015.

not popular with those in power.<sup>12</sup> However I am encouraged by the fact that I can appeal to the national values we espouse – established during our transition to democracy – to guide us in how we speak, act and react in the church, business, politics, education and society in general. These values should be the spinal cord of our daily living. It is only when our values are in place that we get to do the right thing at the right time. They are embodied particularly in our country's Constitution. In the Preamble of this founding document, adopted in 1996, we begin by recognising the injustices of the past, then commit ourselves to healing the divisions of the past and to establishing an open society based on democratic values, social justice and human rights and to free the potential of every South African. It concludes this section by boldly stating 'May God protect our People'<sup>13</sup>. In this way, our constitution enjoins all South Africans to ensure that its vision becomes a growing reality for all. It reminds South Africans using openly biblical language that at the heart of who we are and of a true state is the ability to care for one another, to protect one another, to heal one another and to respect one another.

How, then do we view our current democratic system in the light of these values and against the background of the past hurtful, bad governance and corrupt politics? Our new circumstances raise new questions about the interpretation and application of the Bible's teaching. If we believe that constitutional democracy is – or has the potential to be – 'God's servant for the good', does this mean that government has

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<sup>12</sup> Makgoba, 2014.

<sup>13</sup> Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996.



the right to expect Christians to support whatever they do unreservedly? And is this true especially of the ruling African National Congress and its partners, given that they were the ones who played a leading role in ushering in this new political era? Furthermore, if this is the case, does this reinforce the view held by some, including within the ruling party, that faith communities should indeed 'be subject' to those in power, and let politicians get on with concentrating on 'politics', and instead focus their engagement in areas of so-called 'moral regeneration' of the country, coming into the public arena only to denounce crime? Are Christians bound to submit in the face of government, observing the admonition of St. Paul in his letter to the Romans in the New Testament: 'Let every person be subject to the governing authorities.'<sup>14</sup>

To accept such constraints on Christians – or on anyone, of whatever faith or none – would be to give a naïve and superficial interpretation to St Paul's words. For we must be careful not to confuse the system of government which we enjoy under South Africa's Constitution, with the way in which it is implemented by whichever party holds power. Importantly, the Constitution is not at the service of this or that political grouping, but instead, politicians and their parties must operate as servants of the Constitution for the good of the entire nation. And Christians, churches, and all citizens, have the right – and, indeed, the duty – both to offer critique of the Constitution itself, and to assess how faithfully those holding elected office and the

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14 Romans 13: 1-7

public servants who support them in this, are abiding by its provisions and pursuing the vision it offers.

Outside the churches, there are other prophets too who hold a mirror before our political leadership for them to readjust their moral compass. One such prophet is the poet, Antjie Krog, who expresses my sentiment eloquently and differently in her poem 'Like Death in my Arms'<sup>15</sup> where she says in the last stanza:

*One thing I'm learning  
the more I destroy you the more  
I myself am run into the ground.*

This is apt indeed, for the more our leaders govern badly, the more they run themselves and the country down. It is thus imperative to have citizens who speak out and hold to account those in servant leadership, insisting that they indeed serve.

We in South Africa are, as Kofi Annan says about any democracy, evolving: we are still learning how to become a democracy, and still feeling our ways into the new relationships appropriate to constitutional democracy. Government, political parties, the private sector, academia, the media, civil society, faith communities, now each have our distinctive contributions to make to the life of the nation as a whole. We are still learning where we should stand in solidarity with other elements in society,

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<sup>15</sup> Krog, 2011.

and where we should be critical; what it means to hold and to exchange legitimately diverse perspectives; and how to deliver and receive criticism that is constructive. At the core of these questions is how we guide those in political power and governance by holding them to our national values, their institutional values and even their personal values. How can they serve with these values in mind and use them to transform all into being loving and compassionate, interacting and interdependent communities sharing common interests, common goals and shared value?

Justice, particularly towards the most vulnerable in society, is clearly intrinsic to God's intended good, as described in the opening paragraphs of this essay. Hand-in-hand with justice comes peace, godly peace, which is far more than mere lack of active conflict or noisy disturbance. Rather, it is encapsulated by the Hebrew word of the Old Testament, 'Shalom', which conveys the sense that 'all is right with the world'. The prophets Jeremiah and Ezekiel have shalom in mind, when they denounce political and religious leaders for speaking of 'Peace, peace' when 'there is no peace'<sup>16</sup>. Superficial peace is hypocrisy and worse, when it is not allied with justice. So bad is the situation, says Jeremiah, that society from top to bottom is consumed with greed for unjust gain, by bribery and immorality, with such a total lack of shame. We have every right to expect our political leaders to pursue and deliver genuine shalom. This does not rest upon external appearances of quiescence. It entails comprehensive well-being, through and through, that comes from

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16 Jeremiah 6:14, 8:11; Ezekiel 13:10.

everything being truly 'all right'. It comes with healing, wholeness, redemption, reconciliation, and abundant, flourishing, life.

Abundant life must involve, as our Constitution puts it, 'improv[ing] the quality of life of all citizens', by working diligently to overcome the enormous backlogs in the provision of health, housing, education and other services which apartheid has bequeathed us. The challenge which the Constitution presents to those in politics and governance to fulfil the expectations of the Constitution is matched by that presented to Christians, who are enjoined to feed the hungry, shelter the homeless and tend the sick. In the past two decades, our government has made great strides in improving people's lives by building houses, clinics and schools, and in providing social grants for the poorest of the poor. But we have to summon up the courage to speak out wherever leaders shirk their responsibilities and people are needlessly left in situations of unjustifiable want, short of food, shelter, clothing, health care and a good education. It is this which has led us as religious leaders, as I alluded to earlier, to say that we must stand in solidarity with the needs of the poorest, the vulnerable, the marginalised, the excluded, the voiceless, the stigmatised, and also with the strangers in our midst – the migrants from other parts of Africa who at times have been so cruelly targeted in xenophobic attacks in poor communities resentful of their relative success.

One of the biggest challenges to those of us who were brought up in the apartheid era is how to speak to authority. Under the previous government, the issues were straightforward: apartheid was wrong and there was no need for nuance in our condemnation of the evils of the system. But now the debates involve more subtle arguments than in the past. Rarely are issues so clearly fully right or fully wrong as they were in the apartheid days. Thus churches may work closely with the government in promoting primary health care, our understanding of what is good for people coinciding closely with that of the health department. Yet we have also voiced our concerns about the injustice and lack of cost-effectiveness of the health care system as a whole: while the one the one hand, there is a public health sector which is under-staffed, under-skilled and under-resourced, and so provides inadequate services to most people, on the other there is a private health care system which is getting more and more expensive as funds increasingly answer to shareholders, not to members.

This example illustrates the importance of recognising that to engage constructively in debate means we have to take seriously the complexities of much of contemporary democratic life. Often we are confronted with situations to which there are no easy answers, where every possible option has both positive and negative consequences. The stands that we take must always be rooted in realistic assessments of the situation and of the choices that governments face. Achievements must be acknowledged, and strengths promoted, and it is not going to

help to demand unachievable outcomes. It is far easier to be negative and break down, than it is to offer contributions to positive rebuilding. Criticising and undermining, without offering plausible alternatives, is not going to improve the quality of life of citizens. At the same time, we expect politicians to be realistic in their presentations to the public, since neither will it help for them to make promises that cannot be delivered.

Our outspokenness on the question of corruption, to which I referred earlier, is of course an exception to this. Here is there no room for nuance: most South Africans believe that corruption – in government, in business and in our communities, even in churches – is endemic and is eating at the very moral fibre of our nation and its democratic values. Corruption threatens the dream of rooting out ‘residues’ of apartheid and creating the South Africa the Constitution envisages. Beyond being illegal and immoral, when money is misused, its potential to be use in constructive and helpful ways is lost. Housing, education, health services and social development cry out as obvious examples where we can least afford this. Corruption also causes costs<sup>17</sup> to escalate and often new programmes are sidelined. Money to employ badly needed personnel ‘disappears,’ and resultant under-staffing leads to poor services, worsening results, and a continuing downward spiral. Corruption at this level is the point at which many people get most upset, but it does not happen only on the scale of national government and big business; many South Africans acknowledge having

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<sup>17</sup> Omar, 2013.

offered or having been offered a bribe at some point in their lives, whether to escape a traffic ticket or secure quicker access to a government service. Corruption at that level has an insidious effect on the type of society we are building, which seriously concerns me as a person of faith. The ability of us all, especially those who are most disadvantaged by society's injustices, to always 'do the right thing' is further undermined when it seems that dishonesty by those in positions of power and influence goes unchecked and unpunished.

In a recent lecture<sup>18</sup>, I expressed my puzzlement by what South Africa's president and his lawyers reportedly argued in representations to prosecutors who were considering bringing corruption charges against him. According to a newspaper which saw a prosecution analysis of their reasoning:

*'One of the reasons President... Zuma believed criminal charges against him relating to the arms deal should be dropped was because corruption is only a crime in a "Western paradigm". And even if it was a crime, [Mr] Zuma's lawyers apparently argued, it was a crime where there are "no victims".'*<sup>19</sup>

The president and his lawyers have never responded to the newspaper's report, which led me to ask what values — whether they be cultural, constitutional or faith-based values — they used to come to that conclusion. Moreover, I added:

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18 Makgoba, 2014.

19 City Press, Johannesburg, October 12, 2014.

*'And what can they be talking about if they are saying corruption is a Western paradigm? Presumably, this means that cracking down on corruption is somehow a Western phenomenon which is not appropriate in Africa. Actually, I think it's the other way around. Corruption is a two-way street, a two-way transaction. For corruption to happen, you have to have a corrupter, someone willing to pay the bribe, and what I will call a "corruptee", someone willing to take a bribe. For Africans, over the 50 or 60 years since liberation, the Western paradigm — if indeed there can be said to be one — is one in which Westerners have been the corrupters, and African elites the corruptees.'*

Drawing from the Ten Commandments, I have said that honesty and truthfulness are fundamental biblical principles that apply not only to our religious or private lives, but which should underlie all our relationships with one another, across society. It seems to me that dishonesty and the concealment of the truth are perhaps the greatest threats to constitutional democracy we currently face. We have to demand that our leaders abide by these principles and the principles of the Constitution. Of course not all of them are corrupt but all are complicit in corruption. They only need to turn to the examples of our founding fathers to learn how to lead, through caring and serving. For example, one of Nelson Mandela's greatest characteristics was his ability to revisit his positions and decisions and to change course when it seemed right to do so, not in his own personal interests but in the interests of building and



holding the nation together. Our political leaders are challenged now to reset their moral compasses and to follow his example.

No country can flourish where truth is distorted, suppressed, or subordinated to any interests other than the genuine common good, the abundant life of freedom and shalom. When those who ought to be leading by example instead engage in, or turn a blind eye to, misconduct by those in authority, or become embroiled in untruths and cover-ups, the rot spreads. When those whose lives are most difficult because of joblessness, homelessness and long histories of being disadvantaged, see and read about corruption on the part of those who are in positions of power and influence and wealth, from those who claim that they are leading the country in overcoming the legacies of the past, why should they not draw the conclusion that this is the way forward for all citizens?

## **Conclusion**

Those who have the privilege of exercising authority, especially elected authority, must know themselves as servants of the nation, especially of the poorest, the weakest, the neediest. The world's greatest icons are those who were prepared to risk their own well-being, and if necessary, suffer hardship, so that the rights of the disenfranchised, of families, of women, of children, of all who were oppressed, might be realised.

As a Christian leader, I say to my own constituency that churches have a particular responsibility for inculcating an understanding of what such servant leadership might entail, since we are followers of Jesus Christ, who, insisted that he came ‘not to be served, but to serve’<sup>20</sup>. Here I can boldly also state that Jesus embodies the best that those in governance and politics can aspire to be.

Let me end by quoting Thomas Paine, who offered the following description of effective constitutional government: ‘When it can be said in any country in the world, my poor are happy; neither ignorance nor distress is to be found among them; my jails are empty of prisoners, my streets of beggars; the aged are not in want, the taxes are not oppressive; the rational world is my friend, because I am the friend of its happiness: when these things can be said, then may that country boast of its constitution and its government.’<sup>21</sup> We still have a long way to go before we achieve this. It is utopian but we must keep its ideals before us, and keep striving to attain them. Sometimes we weep that they have not been realised, and that there are too many who see democracy as providing access to power, influence and authority merely to enrich themselves, their families and friends and so betray the legacy for which so many strove, and which in South Africa is enshrined within our Constitution.

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<sup>20</sup> Mark 10:45

<sup>21</sup> Paine, 1856.

We cannot and must not lose courage. The God who plants in our hearts a vision and a longing for a society where the well-being of all is found, is the God who will encourage and strengthen us. He will help us hold fast to all that is good, and right and true, so that we can dedicate our lives to following the paths of justice, of honesty, of truth. He will help us overcome complacency, and confront all that threatens the exercise of good governance and accountability.

I hope I have been able to argue for governance and politics as human enterprises which require all of us and especially our leaders to be motivated by doing the right thing, taking responsibility and serving. The South African context, though we are a secular state, cannot escape the fact that more than 80 percent of its citizens are said to be religious and so I have in this chapter repudiated the artificial divide between religion and politics and juxtaposed the constitutional and religious values to which we aspire. While my argument may affect different nation states in unique ways, the principles underlying good governance and the ethical practice of politics are global and extend beyond geo-political boundaries.

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